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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - KHOROG'S QUIET DISCONTENTS

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey Jacobson; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: During an April 24-25 visit to Khorog, the capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region of Tajikistan encompassing the Pamir mountains, conversations with civil society, political figures, and administrators showed a region with severe economic difficulties, resentment of the central government, and little economic potential except as a niche market for adventure tourism and a source of migrant labor. The long drive back to Dushanbe highlighted Gorno-Badakhshan's remoteness from the rest of Tajikistan, and the internal barriers to trade due to corruption. End Summary.

12. (C) Poloff traveled to Khorog by Aga Khan Foundation helicopter. During the visit, Poloff met with former Mayor Nazarbegim Mubarakshoeva, Khalifa Gulhasan of the Ismaili Committee of Tajikistan, Pamir Energy Director Daler Jumaev, the Chief of the local Customs Committee office, and a group of NGOs active in human rights protection.

The Economy - Tough Times as Always

13. (C) Ismaili Committee Chairman Gulhasan described the economy of the region as largely based on remittances from Russia, noting the many Pamiri men and, increasingly, women going to work there. Noting that in recent months food prices had become painfully high, he said this problem was compounded by increasing energy prices and the closure of the Chinese border for the past eight months due to winter conditions. As for the effects of the recent harsh winter, he said the central government had done "nothing" for Badakhshan, and the region was fortunate to have the support of the Aga Khan.

14. (C) A brief call on Pamir Energy, the private electricity provider to Badakhshan financed by the Aga Khan Network, provided one element of more positive economic news. Director Jumoev said that the company achieves 100 percent collection from residential customers, who account for 79 percent of Pamir's revenues. However, there were continuing problems getting payment from government and businesses, along with political pressure to supply them regardless. Pamir Energy had a few big new customers in sight, Jumoev said, including the Aga Khan-sponsored University of Central Asia (still an empty field on the edge of town), new hotels catering to the tourist trade, and a potential Kazakh-funded mining operation north of Khorog. As for power exports to Afghanistan, Pamir energy had just connected the Afghan village across the border from Khorog, and hoped to connect

several more villages. But this would be a "totally non economic" project, done to assist Afghan development, and operating at a large loss.

Border Trade - Not

15. (SBU) We visited the border crossing in Khorog, where a suspension bridge built by the Aga Khan Network connects Afghanistan and Tajikistan. European Union-funded inspection houses stood on either end of the bridge, in clean pre-fabricated buildings, with impressive "Rapiscan" machines. When Poloff visited in mid-afternoon, there was no activity; the guards said there were 5-10 crossings per day, except during the weekly Saturday market, when up to a thousand Afghans came across to a bazaar in a restricted area on the Tajik side of the bridge. The Tajik Customs Committee Qon the Tajik side of the bridge. The Tajik Customs Committee chief in Khorog said that the Afghans wanted to expand the number of bazaar days, but he didn't see the need for this. He observed that Afghan trade had not noticeably increased in his eight years in Khorog. He further noted that a major draw for the Afghans who crossed to the Saturday bazaar was to consume alcohol. An NGO employee who lived near the bazaar observed that Afghans and Tajiks traded cheap Chinese goods with each other; nothing locally-made changed hands. According to the Customs Chief, the "Rapiscan" machines occasionally turned up smuggled gemstones from Afghanistan, but nothing else of note. He also said he believed the drug traffickers used the bazaars to meet and arrange shipments of narcotics or other contraband, which then moved over the river at isolated places at night.

Autonomy, Borders, and Views of the Center

16. (C) While the border seemed quiet, border issues recently took a high profile in Khorog. The Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan called for a demonstration in Khorog on April 8 to protest a recent government agreement to cede a piece of Gorno-Badakhshan's land to China and an internal redistricting plan which carved additional territory out of Gorno-Badakhshan. However, the protest was cancelled the day before it was to take place. Explanations vary on the real motivations for the demonstration and why it was cancelled. According to Gulhasan of the Ismaili Committee, "narcotics traffickers" became mixed up in organizing the protest, and so the organizers themselves decided to call it off. The motivation for the protest was really high food prices, not the border, he said. He referred to the fear of renewed civil conflict, giving the usual explanation that demonstrations like this were the "root cause" of the civil war.

17. (C) Another local NGO representative, working with journalists, said that the border changes were the real issue; whether important or not to daily life, they represented another violation of the rights of Pamiris. He and other NGO representatives also explained that the land transferred to China held an inactive gold mine, which presumably Chinese investors would exploit. The land had no residents, but nearby villages used it for grazing. When we spoke to former Mayor Muborakshoeva, she said she had been ordered by the regional government to stop the demonstration because it interfered in a "national level" issue. She seemed to agree with this action.

18. (C) While their views on the border issues differed, both NGO contacts and the former Mayor were equally exercised about center-regional relations. On the issue of autonomy, they said essentially the same thing; Badakhshan's autonomy existed on paper only. The media NGO representative pointed to the change of Badakhshan's borders with China and neighboring Tavildara District as violations of regional autonomy and the constitution, and noted that the government response to dissent on this matter was simply to prohibit any mass meeting. Article 81 of Tajikistan's constitution stipulates that any change to Badakhshan's territory must be approved by the region's parliament. The central government

never obtained the consent of the region's parliament, however, when it decided to cede 96,000 hectares of land to China and to internally shift several villages from one region to another.

¶9. (C) The former Mayor and NGO representatives also agreed that the central government did not devote enough resources to Badakhshan, and that President Rahmon was ill-informed by his advisers. The former Mayor said that "the Dangharans" (i.e., the president's inner circle from his native town of Danghara) did not tell the president about the true extent of economic problems in the country. She complained that nothing of significance could be done in the region without the permission of the central government. When we asked for an example, she said she wanted to establish Special Economic Zones to take advantage of Chinese and Afghan border trade, but was repeatedly denied by Dushanbe. She said that the Qbut was repeatedly denied by Dushanbe. She said that the president's pronouncements about making Badakhshan the "golden gateway" to Tajikistan had come to nothing. Instead, she noted, the few factories that had functioned in Khorog under the Soviet Union (cement and meat processing) had long ago closed. "We are seeing a basic law of economics in action" she said; "if you don't produce anything, you don't eat." Muborakshoeva added that Khorog faced a severe housing shortage, poor water supply, and that the security services were so corrupt as to nullify her work as Mayor. She was fired by the Oblast government ten days before our visit, over disagreements about the city budget, she explained, and was sitting at home in her small soviet era apartment contemplating her next move.

¶10. (C) Comments from representatives of NGOs made clear that the President is not popular in Khorog. One Red Crescent employee said that Rahmon was popular only with "those in power" in Khorog, he needed to retire immediately, and that this year "something might happen" to change the political situation. Other NGO employees spoke of the excessive centralization of power and government interference in business. One predicted a general "economic collapse" of Tajikistan in the next ten years if the government did not radically change its economic policies.

Human Rights Roundtable

¶11. (SBU) The group of about ten representatives from local and national groups involved in protecting human rights called the Human Rights Report a "guide" to their activities. Poloff responded that the report was intended as constructive criticism from a friend of Tajikistan, and that we welcomed their observations on its usefulness and on the human rights record of the United States. Participants in the roundtable outlined general problems in Badakhshan, which largely resembled those elsewhere in Tajikistan: land expropriation by government officials, with inadequate compensation; impunity of officials and police who abused people; Afghans held indefinitely without charges. They said the situation for women in Badakhshan was better than in the rest of Tajikistan, and female suicide rates were lower. They named corruption as a major block to development. But they also said that the mentality of Tajiks - their "clannishness" - slowed development. They said the government feared the power of NGOs, which "have no clan," and the recent NGO re-registration process had been a ploy to force NGOs out of business.

The Long Road Home

¶12. (U) Our helicopter ride back to Dushanbe was cancelled due to bad weather, and we hastily rented a van to drive us back. The road to Dushanbe winds along the Afghan border for hundreds of kilometers, in a steep valley, green at its narrow bottom and overshadowed by snow capped peaks over fifteen thousand feet high. Large stretches are unpaved, and sometimes barely a dirt track. The Tajik side has occasional villages featuring bus stops and electricity. The Afghan

side is largely without electricity, and villages are connected by a mule path. The Afghan villages are picturesque, but appear to be islands of habitation, remote from each other. The contrast with the other side of the river, never more than 50 meters distant, is stark. Traffic is fairly routine on the Tajik side, and there were backups of vehicles (cars, minivans, and trucks) when road construction blocked movement. After about twelve hours of bumping slowly down the border road, we turned right and drove up over the mountains toward Kulyob. On top of the pass border guards stopped us for half an hour, berating us with invented arguments for why our presence was illegal - we were not allowed to travel in non-diplomatic vehicles, we were not allowed to travel at all in Tajikistan, we did not all have diplomatic identity cards (they refused to be persuaded that official visitors from Washington didn't normally possess Tajik diplomatic ID cards). Exhausted, we squabbled with them, knowing full well that they simply hoped for a substantial payoff from some random foreigners they had trapped. When we threatened to call the Chief of the Border Guards, their tone changed; we were released with an angry warning.

¶13. (U) Our van threatened to break down just before daybreak, somewhere north of Kulyob. We let the engine cool, and moved on, slowly. Approaching Dushanbe we were stopped and moved on, slowly. Approaching Dushanbe we were stopped at every police checkpoint we saw. The drivers eventually stopped and argued with us that they should not drive into the city, as the Dushanbe police would demand large bribes for them to pass with Badakhshani license plates. Somewhat less patient than when we started out, we demanded to be taken home, and guided them through back streets. We arrived at our destination without further encounters with the police 17 hours after leaving Khorog.

¶14. (C) Comment: Pamiris were surprisingly open in their criticism of the president and the Tajik political system. Few in number, and viewing themselves as culturally distinct and superior to mainstream Tajiks, it is little surprise that they think the Government in Dushanbe does not care enough about them and does not spend enough on them. Badakhshan faces serious economic challenges. Labor migration offers the only source of income for much of the population; tourism development is still in its infancy; border trade seems to make little impact on the regional economy; and as our drive back made clear, Badakhshan is quite remote from the country it ostensibly belongs to. End Comment.

JACOBSON